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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version
Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Yelatskov, A. B. (2012). Territorial-political and regional geopolitical systems: correlation of concepts. *Baltic Region*, 1, 60-65. <https://doi.org/10.5922/2079-8555-2012-1-7>

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Mitglied der

Leibniz-Gemeinschaft

TERRITORIAL SYSTEMS

TERRITORIAL-POLITICAL AND REGIONAL GEOPOLITICAL SYSTEMS: CORRELATION OF CONCEPTS

A. B. Yelatskov*



The article examines the notions of 'territorial political system' and 'regional geopolitical system' as well as a correlation between them from the viewpoint of the so-called activity-based geospatial approach.

A regional geopolitical system includes geopolitical relations between the states within the region and those with powerful external actors. A geopolitical region itself can be characterized by integration, autonomization or a permanent geopolitical conflict. A territorial political system is studied in a broad sense (all political phenomena of a certain territory) and in a narrow context (geopolitical relations of a certain territory). The latter is considered to be a subsystem of regional geopolitical system.

The research results can be applied in the study of geopolitical regions and geopolitical systems. The article develops a methodology for regional geopolitical and political geographical studies.

The author wishes to thank his colleagues from Saint Petersburg State University for their comments on earlier versions.

Key words: territorial political system, regional geopolitical system, geopolitics, political geography, geopolitical region

Territorial political systems (TPS) in their correlation are conventional targets of political geography [7, p. 243] and regional political studies [13]. This notion is also studied by geopolitics, which treats this concept as a local geopolitical system. Thus, there are many interpretations of the notion of TPS, which take into account priorities of the respective field of study. We shall present two interpretations that are considered the most advanced [3].

First — to consider 'a political system' as a generic term for TPS. The TPS

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Received 12 October 2011

doi: 10.5922/2079-8555-2012-1-7

hierarchy in a territorial political social structure is set up: a primary political and geographical location (commune, rural community, etc.) — ... — a country — a community of countries (a geopolitical region). In this sense, the smallest ‘brick’ of a TPS is *political and geographical location*. Each level de jure and de facto has its political functions and correlations within a TPS [7, p. 290—297]. A TPS of the highest level is a system of TPSs of the lowest level (subsystems). According to V. A. Kolosov, “the more territorial and political systems coincide de facto and de jure, the more controllable a political system is in terms of a territorial aspect. However, in practice these systems do not overlap entirely; they overlap mainly at the lowest levels of the hierarchy” [7, p. 297]. Terminologically, such an opposition is not correct, as far as a TPS de jure is a case of a TPS de facto and can greatly affect the operation of the entire system.

This approach can be considered as a mapping of political systems to the levels of a territorial hierarchy of local communities. In this context, spatial and territorial characteristics are considered to be minor and optional for an analysis. A TPS can often be viewed as a ‘point region’, which eliminates some important relations within it from a study. This distortion is somehow flattened in political region studies, which apply geographical research methods. A TPS of this type is also a research subject for political geography, but its numerous political relations, parameters and phenomena are beyond the scope of geographical studies. Those ‘extra’ parameters are usually regarded insignificant and taken no notice of (there are a lot of examples — from political advertising to an order of surnames in a list of voters).

Therefore, it is necessary to study a TPS in a ‘narrow’ sense focusing on spatial and territorial characteristics of a political process rather than all political events and relations within the given territory. This type of TPS is of special interest for political and geographical studies. Reflecting on the above-mentioned ambiguity in the interpretation of TPS, R. F. Turovsky fairly concludes that “the definitions of territorial political systems applied in political geography are not complete enough for the purpose of political studies” [13, p. 32]. It is possible to consider a TPS in a narrow sense as a variation of a territorial system rather than a political one. For a territorial system, systemically important are geographical (territorial) relations between the elements of any nature [10, p. 43—44; 1, p. 60]. In this respect, as U. I. Mereste noted, the viewpoint that the aim of geography is to study any natural and social phenomena as soon as they are localized within a certain territory is unjustified [10, c. 45]. Therefore, we assume two types of TPS:

1. Territorial *political* system in a broad sense (TPS type I) is a local political system (the complex of interdependent political agents, relations and phenomena within a certain territory). V. A. Kolosov defines a TPS of this type as an “intrinsically interdependent combination of elements of a political system ... functioning within a certain territory” [7, p. 234]. However, regional political studies [13, p. 35—36] deal only with the dynamic centre of a political system, the geographical boundaries of which are derived from the spread of dynamic political relations. A TPS in this relation does not have any distinct boundaries or a “clearly defined territory”.

2. *Territorial political system in a narrow sense* (TPS type II or a geographical subsystem of TPS) comprises regional political relations in geographical aspect, their territorial structure and dynamics. In this respect, the main points of the study are spatial axes and centers, growth points, “force fields” and their gradients, spatial structures, spatial drift and diffusion of political phenomena within the territory. A TPS of type II can comprise partial (sectorial) subsystems of the lower level (for example, a TPS of a political party). A TPS of type II is viewed as a subsystem of an integral territorial system with respect to its relations with the environment, i.e. other geographical subsystems of any nature.

Second — to treat a *geopolitical* system as a generic notion for a TPS. In this respect, the smallest ‘brick’ and target of political geographical and geopolitical studies is *geopolitical relation* [5]. From this point of view, geopolitical systems are systems of geopolitical relations. As N. V. Kaledin puts it, according to the activity-based geospatial approach, these systems can be described as “a complex of elements — activity carriers, joined by commonality of target-oriented political functions, implemented through geopolitical relations of a certain type” [5, p. 97]. The largest geographical representation of this system is a political map of the world, which reflects the processes and results of geopolitical activity in the world. A *regional geopolitical system* (RGS) is a target of regional political geography and regional geopolitics. However, these two disciplines study various aspect of an RGS.

In this respect, the notion of “region” and “geopolitical region” become prominent. Regional division of the world is not constant as regions emerge, change and disappear. For example, Australia is now more and more often considered to be part of the South-East Asian region rather than the Australia and Oceania region. The Baltic Sea region in the cold war was ‘suppressed’ by other political regions and has shown itself only in the last 20 years. Defining borders of regions is quite disputable and depends on the study target. Thus, the Baltic Sea region’s borders can be determined according to its basin, or the borders of the countries (or their parts) with an outlet to the Baltic Sea, or the borders of the states which intercross with its catchment basin. V. P. Semyonov-Tyan-Shansky [11] defined three forms of “powerful territorial dominions”. Two of them can be considered with respect to geopolitical regions. Thus, an annular form arises around intercontinental seas (Baltic, Caspian, Mediterranean and other geopolitical regions), while an intercontinental form comprises the territories between the seas (Caucasian, Baltic and Black Sea, Middle East and other geopolitical regions). In that case the geographical factor carries the main region-shaping function; although, it has to be reflected not only in the configuration of the land and the sea, but also in ethnical, political, economic geo-spaces and historical geographical aspects. Thus, we can distinguish a ‘relict’ TPS — a country, once single, but now divided into separate neighbouring parts and inheriting common political features [8].

We can agree that “the subject of regional geo-politics is narrowed down to *geopolitical relations* as well as to relatively dynamic integrity of the region gained through opposition and correlation of various factors (political, economic, confessional, social and ethical)” [2, p. 241]. Regional geopolitics

studies local actors' activities within the given region as well as local forces emerging in global geopolitical processes (for example, confrontations between Serbia and Croatia, DPRK and Republic of Korea, conflicts in the Middle East). An RGS is defined through close geopolitical relations in the region. However, the region in itself is an 'arena for competition of powerful external factors' capable of putting pressure on local actors. Thus, in the Caspian Sea region the most powerful external political players are the USA, the EU and China. 'The great Caspian region' apart from 'the Caspian five' can comprise some neighbours of the first order [6, p. 17]. The relations between all these countries are considered within the respective RGS. The important Baltic RGS relations are relations with Great Britain, the USA, CBSS observer states and other committed powerful actors. An RGS also comprises relations with extraregional parts of the largest countries in the region (Russia, Germany). In other words, an RGS is not limited by the region's territory but associated to the latter through the geospatial part of geopolitical relations. The fact that geopolitical relations go beyond the borders of the region does not change their regional nature. Certainly, the importance of relations with external actors can vary in subregions and alter through time.

As for the regional political geography, it focuses on geopolitical relations, the both sides of which (geospatial and political) are localized within the region's territory only. Contrary to regional geopolitics, external relations of a TPS both in a narrow and broad sense can be studied as relations with the environment or inputs/outputs, but not as an organic part of a system. On the one hand, a TPS is limited within the territory of the region and is a narrower notion compared to an RGS. The latter reflects the integral nature of geopolitics and comprises geopolitical relations with non-political phenomena (natural and social) within the territory. On the other hand, in a broader sense, a TPS comprises lots of characteristics, matters and processes beyond the scope of geography and geopolitics. Consequently, only a TPS in the above-mentioned narrow sense can be treated an RGS subsystem limited by a certain territory and shaped by regional geopolitical relations. Thus, if a TPS is to be correlated with a political system (a territorial unity of people) and defined borders, it is not a case of a RGS. The latter can be trans-border (it can comprise part of a city or parts of the neighbouring countries: Kurdistan, Eurasian 'Heartland') and comprise many TPSs of a large region even when they are at war (RGSs of the Middle East conflict, for example). In that case there is another distinction between the two systems: according to various researchers, a TPS, being a kind of a territorial *social system* (TSS), should match the manageability criteria (should be bound by management relationships) [4, p. 23–25] and be characterized by inner economic, cultural or other integrity [14]. In compliance with the given criteria, the highest level of the TPS hierarchy is made up of the community of countries that have joined in an economic or political union (registered or informal) [7, p. 292]. It is worth mentioning that the notion of 'geography' is regarded as a political and administrative one in English geography [see 15, p. 746, e. g.]. However, a number of researchers mention the antecedence of territorial organization of society and pectoral accessory importance of administrative

division which does not always coincide with the dynamic boundaries of real TSSs [12, c. 20]. A TSS is definitely a multidimensional notion and has various interpretations (trans-border agglomeration, for example), but considering a TPS as its subsystem, the criterion of political manageability gets primary importance. A trans-border region can have managing bodies (operating as a subordinate TPS) or be considered within social and economic integration of neighbouring TPSs. The idea to expand the term 'TPS' to a macro-regional level [7, p. 296; 13, p. 44] is rather disputable as a TPS is based on territorial communities defined as "groups of people which have common interest and residence" [14, p. 8].

Contemporary political studies based on concepts of regionalism and transnationalism consider the notion of 'region' rather irreciprocally — a unity of territorial integrational communities independent of neighbouring territories [9, p. 11—15]. In many cases that concept overlaps with a TSS, a TPS or integrated neighbouring TPSs. However, it is important to mention that a *geopolitical* region can be formed by other types of region-shaping relations. The relations produced by permanent geopolitical conflicts and other issues which disintegrate the regional community are of special importance. Contrary to a TPS, an RGS can fairly be a conflict and uncontrolled system.

In this respect, a TPS in a narrow sense is a subsystem of RGS. Regional political geography and regional political studies by no means are focused on the study of macroregions and international conflicts, but it does not mean that the studied region (or the world as a whole) is a single TPS. We speak mainly of total TPSs, a geopolitical region or an RGS. One and the same TPS or its part can enter different kinds of geopolitical regions, which speaks against referring a geopolitical region to the highest level of the TPS hierarchy. There is another problem of correlating the given systems — spatial disunity. The territory in itself is a number of neighbouring places [1, c. 65]. However, a TPS can consist of several disunited territories or have enclaves. It depends on the number of criteria (such as political unity and manageability) whether it is possible to consider such a structure as a single TPS or as a geopolitical system. At the same time, a geopolitical region should comprise any geographically integrated and limited territory; as a result, various parts of one spatially disunited TPS (a colonial empire, for example) sometimes are not included in one geopolitical region. Although, the relations with extraregional parts of such a TPS are engaged in the formation of a corresponding RGS.

In all the cases the system-shaping geopolitical relations are the key type of relations. Taking into consideration their ambiguous nature, these relations can be called "central geopolitical problems" [5, p. 98]. Whereas the key role in the formation of an RGS belongs to geopolitical relations of the ideal type (including geopolitical interests and 'image' relations), a TPS is mainly based on physical geopolitical relations. Due to the focus of a geopolitical study on the system of interests, some geopolitically 'neutral' and 'irrelevant' aspects of an RGS can easily fall out of its scope, which, nevertheless, does not alter its content.

The author would like to thank his colleagues from St. Petersburg State University for their comments on the earlier versions of this article.

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